



The NOMS Commissioning Strategies Group supports effective policy development and operational delivery within the National Offender Management Service and Ministry of Justice by conducting and commissioning high-quality social research and statistical analysis. We aim to publish information to add to the evidence base and assist with informed debate.

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What works in reducing reoffending in young adults? A Rapid Evidence Assessment¹

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This Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) examined 'what works' in reducing the reoffending of young adult offenders, defined here as those aged between 18 and 25 years. Ten relevant and sufficiently rigorous studies were identified. The quality and robustness of these studies varied, and the interventions they tested ranged from Restorative Justice (RJ) schemes, to re-entry systems and structured offence-focused programmes. Several of these studies reported positive effects in changes in risk factors, and in reductions in recidivism. The strongest evidence emerged from structured parole re-entry schemes, and from offending behaviour programmes. There was more limited evidence in support of RJ interventions.

Key findings

- The REA identified 10 studies that evaluated interventions with young adults (aged 18–25). Six of these studies observed an impact on recidivism.
- The strongest evidence of sizeable reductions in recidivism among young adults comes from two studies of structured parole re-entry systems.
- There is evidence of reductions in criminal recidivism of several types following prison-based offending behaviour programmes and from a structured high-intensity detention regime.
- There is some evidence that following victim–offender conferences, applying an RJ model, there are reductions in reoffending, at least when focused on property crimes.
- A seventh study examining whether treatment for mental health problems had an effect in reducing criminal charges also yielded positive findings but its findings are not wholly conclusive and are difficult to interpret.
- The more military-style (Military Corrective Training Centre, MCTC) detention regime, in common with other studies of this type of intervention, produced no positive outcomes.

¹ This report is published pending the outcome of the Government consultation *Transforming Youth Custody*, and the findings and recommendations will be taken into account in the Government response to the consultation

Introduction and background

The report was prepared at the request of the Correctional Services Advisory and Accreditation Panel (CSAAP), National Offender Management Service (NOMS), to help inform the commissioning process for treatment interventions in criminal justice services. Young adults are responsible for a disproportionately high volume of police-recorded crime, as found in official statistics,² and while those aged 18–25 make up only a tenth of the British population, they account for a third of prison admissions, and a third of the overall social and economic costs of crime.³ The early adult years are sometimes described as a ‘turning point’ during which processes are at work that will influence whether or not individuals continue to offend, or succeed in breaking away from a longer-term criminal career path.⁴ To help understand what can facilitate desistance from offending among young adults, an REA was conducted which examined ‘what works’ in reducing reoffending in young adults.

A complication to this review is that there is no firm definition of ‘young adult’. While the legal position is that this term refers to those aged between 18 and 20 years, most research studies, and many commentaries and policy documents, tend to widen the target age range from 18 to 25. In order to maximise search results and include as much relevant evidence as possible, this review applied the broader age range in its search.

Approach

An REA was conducted, using as its starting point some already published reviews of related portions of this field. REA methodology was then employed to search a series of nine electronic databases and websites for relevant literature,⁵ following inclusion and exclusion criteria specified by CSAAP. The REA was confined to peer-reviewed studies of services, approaches or interventions developed and/or evaluated in work with young adult offenders (age

range 18–25), and published in English in the last 15 years. To be selected for inclusion, a study had to evaluate the impact of interventions or services on numbers or rates of reconviction, arrest, or some other measure of reoffending, or had to have measured change in a well-validated risk factor variable mediating criminal recidivism. From an initial set of 2,967 records screened, this led to the identification of 195 studies from which after de-duplication a reduced set of 112 was examined closely. These studies were screened for quality through application of the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (SMS).⁶ Studies were rated for overall quality on a five-point scale, with 5 as the highest and 1 as the lowest. Following further filtering procedures which excluded those studies or reviews within which findings specific to the group of interest (18–25 year olds) could not be determined, a final group of ten studies was designated for detailed review. Given the small number of relevant studies, all ten studies, regardless of their SMS score, were included in the review. The SMS rating was used to attach a relative weight to the importance of the findings when evaluating the overall importance of a study.

The present review explicitly excluded studies of interventions to reduce substance abuse among young offenders, as these are co-commissioned, rather than directly commissioned by NOMS.

Results

The overwhelming majority of studies found focused on younger (juvenile) offenders. Reviews of interventions with adult offenders typically included studies covering a wide age range, and few reported findings by age band in a way that could inform this REA. Combining all sources, a total of ten independent studies were located. Of these:

- Five were from the USA, four from the UK and one from Australia.
- One (and one part of another) reached the highest level of methodological rigour according to the SMS, three (and the remaining two parts of another study) achieved level four, while the other five were of limited scientific rigour. The findings

² Lösel, F. (2012). What works in correctional treatment and rehabilitation for young offenders? In F. Lösel, A. Bottoms and D. P. Farrington (eds), *Young Adult Offenders: Lost in Transition?* Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 74-112.

³ Prison Reform Trust (2012). *Old Enough to Know Better? A Briefing on Young Adults in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales*. London: Prison Reform Trust.

⁴ Siegel, L. J. (2012). *Criminology*, 11th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

⁵ Scopus, Web of Knowledge, Web of Science, PsychINFO, PsyArticles, MEDLINE, National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Cochrane Library, Campbell Library.

⁶ Farrington, D. P., Gottfredson, D. C., Sherman, L. W. and Welsh, B. C. (2002). The Maryland Scientific Methods Scale. In L. W., Sherman, D. P. Farrington, B. C. Welsh and D. L. MacKenzie (eds) *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention*. London: Routledge, pp. 13-21.

from these five studies were interpreted with caution, and the strength of evidence for each finding was made explicit when reporting the results.

Consequently, the number of studies relevant to the main aim of the REA, and the quality of those studies, permits only tentative conclusions to be drawn.

A key finding is that among a number of these studies there was evidence of positive effects in terms of changes in risk factors or predictor variables, and in reductions in recidivism. The trend observed among the small number of findings that have been assembled is not consistent with the view that this age group is in any obvious sense intrinsically more difficult or challenging to achieve good outcomes with, than those at lower or higher age ranges.

Examples of effective interventions

In six out of ten studies of interventions with this age group there are beneficial effects observed for the impact of a variety of methods. The positive effects noted are as follows:

- The strongest, most robust evidence of sizeable reductions in recidivism comes from two studies of structured parole re-entry systems.⁷
- There is promising evidence of reductions in criminal recidivism of several types following prison-based offending behaviour programmes⁸ and from a structured high-intensity detention regime,⁹ although these studies lack robustness of design.
- There is some evidence from a rigorous study that following victim–offender conferences, applying an RJ model, there are reductions in reoffending, at least when focused on property crimes.¹⁰

- There is firmer evidence of changes on cognitive skills measures following the Aggression Replacement Training (ART) programme,¹¹ which were sustained at a 24-month follow-up, although the study is limited in its scientific rigour.

- A seventh study examining whether treatment for mental health problems had an effect in reducing criminal charges also yielded positive findings¹² but its findings are not wholly conclusive and are difficult to interpret.

Limitations

The robustness and likely replicability of some of these findings may be questioned, however, as they are not typically derived from high-quality research designs. The success of one element of RJ must be set alongside the other variants that found no differences. The more military-style (Military Corrective Training Centre, MCTC) detention regime, in common with other studies of this type of intervention, produced no positive outcomes. The cognitive skills programme had no effect on rates of robbery or acquisitive offending (and may even be associated with marginal increases), and the methodology of using prediction scores for comparative purposes is questioned by some researchers. On the other hand in most studies assembled here sample sizes are adequate and in several studies they are very large.

In addition, we cannot be sure that the findings from the US and Australian studies are generalisable to England and Wales, given the differences in context.

Finally, this review only included those interventions which have been subject to reasonably robust evaluation. There may well be other interventions that work, but that currently lack rigorous evaluation.

⁷ **Braga, A. A., Piehl, A. M. and Hureau, D. (2009).** Controlling violent offenders released into the community: Evaluation of the Boston Reentry Initiative. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 46, 411-436; **Josi, D. A. and Sechrest, D. K. (1999).** A pragmatic approach to parole aftercare: Evaluation of a community reintegration program for high-risk youthful offenders. *Justice Quarterly*, 16, 51-80.

⁸ **Travers, R. and Mann, R. E. (2014).** *Do Cognitive Skills Programmes Work with Young Adult Offenders?* London: National Offender Management Service, Ministry of Justice.

⁹ **Farrington, D. P., Ditchfield, J., Hancock, G., Howard, P., Jolliffe, D., Livingston, M. S. and Painter, K. A. (2002).** Evaluation of two intensive regimes for young offenders. Home Office Research Study 239. London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate.

¹⁰ **Shapland, J., Atkinson, A., Atkinson, H., Dignan, J., Edwards, L., Hibbert, J., Howes, M., Johnstone, J., Robinson, G. and Sorsby, A. (2008).** *Does Restorative Justice Affect Reconviction? The Fourth Report from the*

Evaluation of Three Schemes. Ministry of Justice Research Series 10/08. London: Ministry of Justice.

¹¹ **Currie, M. R., Wood, C. E., Williams, B. and Bates, G. W. (2012).** Aggression Replacement Training (ART) in Australia: A longitudinal youth justice evaluation. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 19, 577-604.

¹² **Pullmann, M. D. (2011).** Effects of out-of-home mental health treatment on probability of criminal charge during the transition to adulthood. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81, 410-419.

Implications/conclusions

Overall, the evidence directly pertaining to the question set in this review is unfortunately sparse, and firm conclusions are difficult to draw.

Based on numerous systematic reviews and/or meta-analyses, a wide range of interventions has been shown to work with younger offenders,¹³ but there is far less evidence directly pertaining to the young adult age group aged 18–25. Some approaches shown to work with the younger age group involve work with families and may be less applicable with those who have become detached from families and have at least notionally (and in legal terms formally) entered adulthood. Such approaches may be considered inappropriate or may simply be impractical to implement. The studies reviewed here show that intervention can be successful within this age range, but the volume of findings is such that much more research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

While the following proposals can only be tentative at best, there are preliminary indications from this research that a cohesive strategy could be formulated for developing work with the young adult age group.

- For lower risk property/acquisitive offenders managed in the community, there could be benefits from extending the role of RJ ‘conferencing’ methods which appear more successful than either direct or indirect mediational models. This suggestion is however derived from one element of one study only; and it is recommended that this method be subject to a fuller and more extensive trial across multiple sites focusing on young adults with convictions for this type of offence, and only for those with an identifiable victim.
- For those given custodial sentences, results suggest that relatively higher levels of structure are beneficial, but should include treatment / rehabilitative elements. In addition to focusing on offending behaviour, it is certainly advisable

that any such interventions also address issues of likely concern to the age group. This suggestion draws on findings that have emerged from types of research other than outcome evaluations. However, although tentative, such an idea has a high level of plausibility when viewed in the context of other types of research. Extrapolating from this, it should be possible to develop a programme or suite of programmes that combine features of the offence-focused activities already available, with information drawn from ‘emerging adulthood’ research, identifying issues that are potential anchors in engaging the attention of participants and integrating them in programmes using well-established methods.

- Analysis of data on criminal histories of young offenders in custody, and comparing this with what has been learnt from longitudinal studies about crime pathways or trajectories¹⁴ could lead to definition of discrete ‘target groups’. The latter might be initially defined according to principal offence type (e.g. acquisitive, drug-related, violent), or to offence patterns over time. However, the process could also lead to development of interventions that address the principal offence motivations that are primary *causal* influences on reoffending, as opposed to being *correlates* of the kind used in many risk assessment instruments.
- The apparently heightened sensitivity that individuals in this age range may have to the opinions and perceptions of peers could be addressed in preparatory sessions prior to embarking on offence-focused work. Such sessions could also address relationship or stress-management issues that may be preoccupying individuals within this age range to an even greater extent than they do other age groups.
- The process of release and re-entry is more likely to be successful if it is planned and structured and contains effective rehabilitative elements. The clearest findings located in this REA relate to the parole and re-entry studies. These could be adapted to UK settings, and

¹³ Dowden, C. and Andrews, D. A. (1999). What works in young offender treatment: A meta-analysis. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 11, 21-24; Greenwood, P. (2008). Prevention and intervention programmes for juvenile offenders. *The Future of Children*, 18, 185-210; Lipsey, M. W. (2009). The primary factors that characterize effective interventions with juvenile offenders: A meta-analytic overview. *Victims and Offenders*, 4, 124-147.

¹⁴ Loeber, R., Farrington, D. P., Stouthamer-Loeber, M. and White, H. R. (2008). *Violence and Serious Theft: Development and Prediction from Childhood to Adulthood*. New York, NY: Routledge.

modified to address some of the problem areas identified above, and others explored in relevant qualitative studies.¹⁵ A programme of qualitative research focused on young adult offenders' perceptions of their prospects preceding and following release from custody could be particularly valuable in this respect.

¹⁵ **Arditti, J. A. and Parkman, T. (2011).** Young men's re-entry after incarceration: A developmental paradox. *Family Relations*, 60, 205-220; **Chui, W. H., Tupman, B. and Farlow, C. (2003).** Listening to young adult offenders: Views on the effect of a Police–Probation initiative on reducing crime. *The Howard Journal*, 42, 263-281; **Inderbitzin, M. (2009).** Reentry of emerging adults: Adolescent inmates' transition back into the community. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24, 453-476.